

An Empirical Study of Using Stories to Promote Learners' Motivation Towards English

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Abstract

Stories are often used in English teaching. The present case study intends to explore how English story learning and teaching promotes learners' motivation towards English and English learning. Five students were involved in this case study. The participants learnt 10 short stories in 9 months. Data was collected through interviews and classroom observations. The analysis shows that all the participants have more motives in English learning after the English story teaching practice. The participants only had an instrumental or no motivation in English learning at the beginning of the study and one or two more types of motivation had been found by the end of the teaching practice.

Key words: Stories; Motivation; English

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of motivation in enhancing second/foreign language learning is obvious. Brown (2000) believes that a learner will be successful with the proper motivation. Gardner (2006) points out students with higher levels of motivation will do better than students with lower levels. He further adds that "if one is motivated, he/she has reasons (motives) for engaging in the relevant activities, expends effort, persists in the activities, attends

to the tasks, shows desire to achieve the goal, enjoys the activities" (p.243).

Motivation is "a very complex phenomenon with many facets.... Thus, it is not possible to give a simple definition" (Gardner, 2006, p.242). Brown believes motivation is "quite simply the anticipation of reward" (2000, p.160). However, Keller (1983, p.389) defines motivation from the cognitive view as "the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they exert in that respect". Although researchers give different definitions, it is obvious that motivation is a combination of factors in SLA as Gardner (1985, p.10) points out "effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes towards learning the language."

Early research tended to view motivation as a stable characteristic of the learner. In fact, motivation is a dynamic process and it would change over time. Dornyei (2001) develops a continuous process the motivation would undergo: choice motivation, executive motivation and motivational retrospection. In the first phase, motivation would be generated, which brings the selection of the goal or task to be pursued. And then necessary tasks should be carried out to maintain the generated motivation. Finally, learners would evaluate how things went. This means motivation can be nurtured and maintained through efforts and its changes over time can be analyzed.

Skehan (1989) suggested four hypotheses for motivation. First, motivation comes from interest. That is, if someone is interested in a task, he or she will be motivated. Second, people would be motivated to do a task if they have the requisite skills. Third, people are motivated to do a task because of their curiosity which humans naturally bear. This natural curiosity is intrinsic motivation or integrative motivation. Gardner and Lambert (1972) defines Intrinsic or integrative motivation as "those which indicate an interest in learning

the language in order to meet and communicate with members of the second language community". Therefore, some learners will be eager to learn a language because they want to know more about its culture, to meet the speakers of the language. Language teachers should understand what factors students bring to learning and make good use of them. The last hypothesis is that the use of external incentives can motivate people, which are known as extrinsic or instrumental motivation. This kind of motivation is defined as "those which stress the pragmatic aspects of learning the second language without any particular interest in communication with the second language community" (Ibid). A learner is instrumentally motivated when he/she wants to learn a language to pass the examination, to get a good job, to travel around the world or to get their parents' praise and many other reasons. External incentives are effective in producing or changing behaviour, especially for an immediate response. For example, students in high schools would work hard to pass the entrance examination, or they would try their best to learn English to pass TOFEL. However, this kind of change is often short-lived and can lead to low quality performance in the long run, such as in "diminished complex and creative thinking and failure to complete multistep problem-solving tasks" (Murray & Christison, 2010, p.176). Besides integrative and instrumental motivation, Cooper and Fishman (1977) suggest a third type: developmental motivation. Sometimes, learners would like to learn a new language for their personal development or personal satisfaction, such as watching movies and reading books in English.

A language may be learned for one or a collection of practical reasons. Therefore, identifying the changes of young learners' motivation in the story teaching practice will be related to the reasons for which they learn the English language. In other words, instrumental, integrative and personal reasons will be considered as far as the students' motivation is concerned. Therefore, in the present study, the reasons for which the participants learn English will be collected through interviews and observation and then those reasons would be grouped into three scales—the instrumental, integrative and personal motivation—to determine the changes of the participants' motivation in English story teaching practice.

Stories have been used for transmitting knowledge among people for a long time. In the teaching of stories, teachers often tell some stories are relevant to the content of the curriculum or they could choose stories as the main teaching materials. The teaching process includes the collection, choosing, presentation, analyzing and evaluation of the stories. This method has been proved to be successful in the field of the first language learning and teaching. In recent years, many language teachers and researchers are devoted to the application of stories in second or foreign language teaching and learning.

Many researchers (e.g., Lu, 2006; Chen, 2005; Cheng & Wang, 2008; Sun & Sui, 2008; Liu & Gao, 2008; Zhang, 2010; Li, 2011) give their reasons and suggestions for using stories in English teaching in primary schools. Other researchers (e.g., Chao, 2004; Tian, 2011; Lin, 2011) do empirical studies to prove the effectiveness of using stories in English teaching to young learners.

The practice of story teaching in the context of foreign language classroom is as rich as its theories. As early as in 1990, Barton and Booth pointed out that English stories could be viewed as an important tool in teaching foreign language. In the following years, the significance and education value of stories in foreign language teaching has been discussed over and over again. Andrew Wright is one of the researchers who are interested in using stories in foreign language teaching. He practiced teaching English with this method in Hungary for years and made great achievement. In his book *Storytelling with Children*, Wright (1996) shares his experience of using English stories in foreign language teaching and offers systematic guidance to foreign language teachers. Other researchers (e.g., Ellis & Brewster, 1991; Watts, 1992; Handler, 1993) also give their suggestions for including stories in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Wilson (1997) believes storytelling can improve the level of learning in speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Isbell (2002) finds out many stories that work well with children include repetitive phrases, unique words, and enticing description. Slattery and Willis (2001) hold the view that stories are valuable resources for language teaching. For example, the funny stories are motivating so as to encourage students to continue their learning. The fantasy is adapted from the real world, therefore, they can stimulate students' imagination and creativity. Through listening or reading stories, the learners will share a social and emotional experience.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The present research intends to discover how English story learning and teaching promotes learners' English. The data of the changes of learners' motivation towards English and English learning during the research are collected and analyzed. Five students in Grade 4 were selected as the participants in the study. *ENGLISHXP LIBRARY* published by Higher Education Press was selected as the teaching materials.

English teaching in this study followed Chen's (2004) four-step model: Warm Up—Presentation—Practice—Follow-up:

2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The teaching program lasted for about 9 months. There was a two-hour English class from 2 to 4 o'clock every

Sunday afternoon, followed by interviews. During classes, one researcher would observe the participants' behaviors and fill up an observation sheet. Every class was recorded by another researcher in order to help researchers to check their observation. After classes, the participants were encouraged to talk freely about their feelings of English and English learning in the past week and researchers would ask the participants to explain their behaviors in class, such as the reason that they do not raise hands. The semi-structural interviews were conducted to the participants every two months.

2.1 Classroom Observation

The observation sheet includes five parts: the overall assessment, times of hand-up or responding to questions, story retelling, reading and writing:

The criteria for the overall assessment are adopted from Lu's (2008) research on English teaching.

2.2 Interviews

The interviews include two parts: the follow-up interviews after each class and the semi-structural interview conducted to the participants every two months. The semi-structural interviews were conducted to the participants every two months. It covers three aspects: the participants' motivation in English learning. Questions about the participants' motivation in English learning were adapted from Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (the instrumental and integrative orientation scales) and Cooper and Fishman's (1977) personal motivational construct. The reasons that the participants study English represent the three motivational constructs: instrumental motivation (e.g., my parents asked me to study English), integrative motivation (e.g., I want to communicate with English speakers) and personal or developmental motivation (e.g., I want to read the English stories).

The interviews with the participants were transcribed and translated into English. For the analysis of the interview data, the interviews with the five participants were read and categorized. Then the researcher undertook the coding and decoding of the interview data. The coding includes open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In opening coding, the researcher discovers and classified the identified concepts into different categories; in the axial coding, the researcher tried to find the relationship among these categories and set up connections among them; in the selective coding, the core categories were abstracted to help narrow down the analysis scope of the research.

3. DATA DESCRIPTION

3.1 Description of Tina's Case

Tina is a talkative girl. She likes English very much and works so hard that she always gets high marks in English

tests. She attends all the classes in the English story teaching practice, the follow-up interviews and did five semi-structural interviews.

Tina is a highly motivated student. She seemed to have an integrative motivation in learning English at the beginning of the lesson. In the first interview, she expressed a strong desire to study English well:

Extract 1:

I want to go to America or Britain to continue my study when I grow up. I want to travel around the world. So I think I must study English well, otherwise I cannot understand the lessons or talk with foreigners.

However, she only cared about grammar and vocabulary in the textbooks and rarely listened to or read other English materials. In the process of reading, she would circle all the phrases, vocabulary and grammar that she thought important in the tests. This is verified in her other interviews:

Extract 2:

In fact, I do not know the things about foreign countries. My parents and friends always talk about them, so I think the things abroad must be very interesting. ... Yes, I would be very happy if I get a high score in English tests. My parents would praise me and my classmates would admire me. I feel very proud, so I try to remember all the words, phrases and grammar. Because my teacher says they would appear in the tests. I want to get high scores. I do not like to listen to English, because they do not test it. ...

After a period of English story teaching practice, there are some changes of Tina's motivation in English learning. Although "going abroad" and "getting a high score" were still the most important reasons that she studied English, she added "I find English stories are interesting so I want to read more interesting books and know more things in foreign countries." Besides the grammar and vocabulary, she began to care about the plot of the story and talked about the funny characters in the stories with other participants.

At the end of the teaching practice, Tina was still happy with her high score, but she found the joy in reading an interesting English story and knowing more about the western cultures through reading was no less than what her high score brought to her. Although she still has a habit of circling grammar and phrases, she would like to enjoy the stories. In her last interview, she claimed:

Extract 3:

I rarely read English stories before. There are so many interesting stories, such as the silly cat and love Sam. Now I want to read more and every time I finish reading I feel very happy. They are more interesting than English words and grammar. I will ask my father to buy more storybooks. ... I still want to go abroad but it is too far away. ... Of course, I want to get my high score, but I think reading English stories is also very great....

From the observation and interviews, we can see Tina had a strong instrumental motivation in English learning at the beginning, after experiencing the joy of reading stories, her integrative and developmental motivation is gradually generated and being maintained through the story teaching practice.

3.2 Description of Betty's Case

Like Tina, Betty's English is great, too. However, she is not so talkative. She attends most of the classes in the English story teaching practice and the follow-up interviews and did four semi-structural interviews.

Betty is also a highly motivated student. At the beginning of the lesson, she had an integrative motivation in learning English. In the first interview, she stated the reasons that she studied English as:

Extract 4:

I think going to another country is very cool and talking to foreigners in English is cooler. Once, I met a foreigner. I do not know where she is from, maybe America. I said 'hello' to her. She was very happy and said 'hello' to me too. Then she said something that I did not understand. I escaped. Therefore, I want to study English well so that I can talk with them.

However, in the following interviews, her instrumental motivation in English learning was found stronger. The happiest thing in learning English for her was "when I get the highest English scores." Every time she got a good mark, her parents would buy her some presents and her teacher would praise her. She expressed her fears in failing in English learning in the following interview:

Extract 5:

I do not know what to do if I get a bad score. I am a good student. I always get score in my test, both in Chinese, math and English. I am working hard to keep my position in my class. Therefore, I will work hard to remember English words, recite the texts and do all the tasks my teacher assigns me to do. Sometimes, my parents will buy some English exercise books for me. They are boring but my parents say I should finish them.

After a period of English story teaching practice, besides "talking to foreigners" and "getting a high score", Betty viewed "the joy of learning something from the English stories" as another important reason that motivated her English study. At the end of the teaching practice, Betty was still motivated by getting high scores and the ability of talking with foreigners. However, the following interview shows that the integrative and developmental motivation play an important role in her English learning.

Extract 6:

These stories are interesting. I like reading them. For example, the cat in the story is so silly. He chases the toy mouse. The mice are very clever. When I read them, I care more about the plot and want to know what will happen next. Therefore, I will finish reading them without break. ...Of course, I want to get

high score. But I still enjoy reading interesting stories. I think I should learn English well, otherwise so that I can read more interesting and longer stories.

From the observation and interviews, we can see Betty had a strong instrumental motivation and the integrative motivation in English learning at the beginning. These two kinds of motivation lasted in the whole study. After she realized the happiness of learning English stories, she had a strong desire of learning English for her own development, such as reading new English stories, and her personal motivation was strengthened.

3.3 Description of Linda's Case

Linda is a shy girl and her English is good. Because she is a little younger than her classmates, she has to work harder to catch up with others. Linda thinks she is not clever and her English is not good enough and thus she lacks confidence in English learning. She attended all of the teaching practice and the follow-up interviews and finished five semi-structural interviews.

Different from the other two girls, Linda was not so motivated in English learning at the beginning of the study. She is a clever and obedient student and her English is good. However, when asked for the reasons that she studied English, she stated:

Extract 7:

The reason? My school has English lessons so I study English. My parents often told me I had to study English well if I want to go abroad. I am not sure whether I would go abroad if I grow up. They said if my English was not good, I could not go into a good university or get a good job.

From the above interview, we can see, Linda did not have the clear goal of leaning English. She just followed her teacher and parents' orders. She also expressed her fear of learning English: "Sometimes, learning English is a little difficult. The vocabulary is long and the grammar is difficult so I do not want to learn them."

After a period of English story teaching practice, Linda made some progress in English, especially in remembering the words and guessing meaning from the context. She was happy about her progress. From the following interview, we can see, she was instrumentally motivated.

Extract 8:

I wanted to study English well and got a higher score. But every time that I met some difficult words and grammars, I would lose faith and thought I would never learn English well. Now I find even I do not know every word clearly I can try to guess the meaning of the story. The amazing thing is that I am right in most cases. I have confidence in learning English well and getting a higher score.

At the end of the teaching practice, Linda became highly motivated. Her English score was higher than before. This increased her instrumental motivation. Besides, she found the differences between Chinese and

western cultures were very interesting and she wanted to know more about foreign countries. The interesting English stories were also attractive to her. By the end of the study, she had formed a habit of reading some English stories before she went to bed. This showed that Linda had an integrative and developmental motivation.

Linda was not motivated in learning English at the beginning of the study. However, after a period of practice, her confidence was built through her improvement, which increased her instrumental motivation. By the end of the study, the other two kinds of motivation: The integrative and developmental motivation was found in Linda's interview and observation.

3.4 Description of John's Case

John is a clever boy. He neither hates nor likes English. John attended most of the teaching practice and the follow-up interviews and there were four semi-structural interviews with him.

John's English is great. He had a good habit of learning. He would listen to English teachers in class and finish his homework carefully. After class, he would do some exercises assigned by his mother. However, when asked the reasons that he studied English at the beginning of the study, John seemed to have no definite purpose of learning English:

Extract 9:

I don't know. My school has English class. I will do everything my teachers ask me to do. My mother takes care of my study. She always buys some exercise books for me and helps me with my difficulties in English. Learning English is easy for me. I can remember the words and finish my homework quickly. I have a lot of spare time so my mother designs a timetable for me after class. ...

In the interview about his instrumental motivation, John claimed "although I am not the top student in my class, my English score are not bad. I do not care too much about my score." Besides, no integrative or developmental motivation was found in his interviews and the researchers' observation. Therefore, we assert that John had formed a good habit with his mother's help and he was used to learning English every day. In the English story teaching practice, John showed a great interest in English stories and expressed his dissatisfaction with his English textbook:

Extract 10:

These stories are so interesting and the pictures are so attractive. ... There are some stories in my textbooks but the pictures are small and many words appear beside the picture. We often study how to introduce ourselves and how to give directions to others. These things are boring. We know how to do them in Chinese and I never meet a foreigner so I don't think they are useful for me.

John's interest in reading English stories was increasing during the teaching practice. He finished

reading 10 stories selected as the teaching materials in the first two months. In the following study, he also read the stories of Levels 4, 5 and 6 by himself or with his mother's help. This was the first time that John asked for English books and followed his own learning plan. In the last interview, he could not help expressing his joy in English learning and his interest in knowing more about the western cultures:

Extract 11:

I like reading Chinese stories and novels that interest me. Now I find English stories are interesting too. But the stories are a little short. I think if the stories are longer, they must be more interesting. I want to learn more English so that I can read more stories. That must be very great. They always have parties and it seems interesting. When I grow up, I want to have the chance to attend their party.

From the observation and interviews, we can see John did not have a definite purpose of learning at the beginning. After experiencing the joy of reading stories, his developmental motivation is gradually generated and maintained through the story teaching practice and he also showed an interest in integrating with western cultures at the end of the study.

3.5 Description of Frank's Case

Frank is a naughty boy. He showed little interest in English in the initial period of the teaching practice and always failed in his English exams. He did not attend the teaching practice frequently in the first two months of the study. However, in the following practice, he almost attended all the classes and follow-up interviews and finished three semi-structural interviews.

At the beginning of the study, Frank was not motivated but forced to study English. Learning English was a difficult task for him. For example, he would spend a lot of time remembering a new word and then forget it quickly. He could not understand his English teacher in class and always fell asleep. He rarely finished his English homework on time. Therefore, his English teacher lost patience with him. He did not want to study English. However, he would pretend to learn when his parents scold or beat him.

The situation lasted until two months later when the participants were taught the story *Brown Mouse Plays a Trick*. Frank has a white mouse and he likes it very much. Therefore, the clever mice in the story attracted him very much and he learnt the story by heart this time. In finishing the writing tasks, he drew a series of pictures of his white mouse illustrated with some English words. His story was welcomed by all the participants and researchers and he was very proud. He liked the story so much that he read the story almost every day and could recite it a month later. From then on, he came to class every time and began to show interest in English learning. In one interview, he said,

Extract 12:

I am afraid of leaning English. It is difficult. When we learned the story about the clever mice, I never though of learning it well. But the mice are clever and they are just like my white mouse. I do not know how I remembered the words in the story. But I often read some lines to my mouse every night and asked him to learn from these clever mice. I was shocked that day when I could recite the story. I was very happy when you and other students praised me. I cannot believe I can study English well.

In the final English exam in his primary school, Frank made great progress. He was very happy and expressed his desire to learn English well:

Extract 13:

Recently, I find I can understand my English teacher in class. I am very happy about this so I pay more attention than before. ... This time I got a good score in the English tests. My teacher and my parents praised me. I am very excited. I will work harder to get a better score.

Frank did not want to study English at the initial period of the study. However, when he came across the topic he was interested in, he could not help learning English. His desire of knowing more about the things he interested in gives him a motive in English learning. Besides, his instrumental motivation was generated after he realized his progress.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to determine how the participants' motivation in English learning changed in the English stories teaching practice. Three types of motivation—instrumental, integrative and personal motivation—were taken as the scale. The findings show that all the participants have more motives in English learning in the English story teaching practice. The participants only had an instrumental or no motivation in English learning at the beginning of the study and one or two more types of motivation had been found by the end of the teaching practice.

Tina had a strong instrumental motivation in English learning at the beginning of the study. She studied English for some external reasons, such as “getting a good score”, “getting praise” and “going abroad”. It is this strong instrumental motivation that urges her to work hard on English just as the hypothesis Skehan (1989) suggested “the use of external incentives can motivate people”. Therefore, she performed well in English learning, especially in tests. At this stage, no integrative or developmental motivation was found in the interviews and observations. However, maybe because of her strong desire for “getting a good score”, most of her attention was paid to grammar, vocabulary and other things that she thought may appear in the tests. Although external incentives are effective in producing or changing

behaviour, especially for an immediate response, this kind of change is often short-lived and can lead to low quality performance in the long run. Therefore, we are not sure whether this would hinder her English development in her future study. To our excitement, as Andrew said, “all children like stories”, after experiencing the joy of reading stories, Tina began to pay some attention to the content and the plot of English stories. It is during this stage that her integrative and developmental motivation in English learning was generated. The more stories she read, the more interesting differences she found between Chinese and western cultures. She showed great interest in knowing more about other countries. In conclusion, Tina had a strong instrumental motivation in English learning but not integrative or developmental motivation in English learning at the beginning of the study. However, her integrative and developmental motivation are gradually generated and being maintained through the story teaching practice.

Like Tina, Betty had a strong instrumental motivation in English learning at the beginning of the study. She wanted to “get a high score” and could not stand the failure in English tests. This also proved the effectiveness of the instrumental motivation in the short-term. Besides, she had a desire of “talking with foreigners” because she had “a great experience to talk with foreigners in English”. Therefore, she not only tried to perform well in English tests, but wanted to learn something that helped her communicate with foreigners fluently. This is in accordance with Skehan's another two hypothesis of motivation: motivation comes from interest; people are motivated to do a task because of their curiosity which humans naturally bear. As Dornyei suggested necessary tasks should be carried out to maintain the generated motivation. Therefore, Betty's problem is whether her integrative motivation in English leaning would sustain if she did not have the chance to communicate with others in English for a long time. Our doubts were removed by her performance in the following teaching practice. She found she could know many things through reading English stories. Although she “had no chance to talk with foreigners now”, she thought she would perform well if she “learnt more things in their countries”. After she realized the happiness of learning English stories, she had a strong desire of learning English for her own development, such as reading new English stories and making English stories. Therefore, Betty had a strong instrumental motivation and an integrative motivation in English learning at the beginning. These two kinds of motivation lasted in the whole study. After she realized the happiness that learning English stories, she had a strong desire of learning English for her own development.

Linda had no motivation in learning English at the beginning of the study. She thought English was too difficult for her. Sometimes, she would try to study English. However, when she came across some

difficulties, she could not turn to her parents who knew little of English, and this shy girl dared not ask for others' help. Therefore, she asserted "English is the most difficult thing in the world" and "I can never study English well". Gradually, she lost interest in English. In the English story teaching practice, with the help of her partner and the researchers, Linda made some progress, especially in remembering English words and guessing meaning from the context. She got a higher score in the mid-term test, which gave her a lot of confidence. Her achievement in English motivated her to work harder. This is also consistent with the view that one's achievement in his study would strengthen his instrumental motivation. Besides, she began to try to read English stories by herself and expressed a strong desire of reading more English stories and learning something about western cultures. At the beginning of the study, none of the three types of motivation, including instrumental, integrative and developmental motivation, was found in Linda. However, her instrumental motivation was generated in with her improvement in English. By the end of the study, the other two kinds of motivation: The integrative and developmental motivation had been found.

Frank did not have the least desire to learn English. He rarely listened to his English teacher in class or finished his homework on time. Therefore, his English teacher lost patience with him. Sometimes, he would pretend to be learning if his parents scolded or even beat him. He even wanted to quit the program when he found he could not understand anything in the first teaching practice. Researchers had done much work to persuade him into coming back to the program. He still had no motivation in English learning in the following teaching practice until two months later when the participants were taught the story *Brown Mouse Plays a Trick*. As his favorite animal, the mice became his motive of learning English during that period. Because he liked the mice so much that he did not think remembering so many new words and a long story was a challengeable job. Frank made great progress in his final English examination. His progress surprised his parents, his teachers and classmates, who gave him much praise and encouragement. Frank was very happy about this and he said he would work hard in English to get a higher score. Frank did not have any motivation in English learning at the beginning of the study. However, when he came across the topic he was interested in, he spared much effort on it. His desire of knowing more about the things he is interested in gives him a motive in English learning and his instrumental motivation was generated after he realized his progress.

John did not have a definite purpose of leaning at the beginning. Although neither instrumental, developmental motivation nor integrative one in English learning was found, he performed well in English learning. This surprised all of the researchers. Later, we found that John had formed a good habit of learning English

every day. For example, his mother would assign some comprehension or vocabulary exercises to him. Although he showed little interest in these assignments, John always followed his mother's orders. This is in harmony with Dornyei's assertion: Various family characteristics and practices are linked with school achievement (Dornyei, 2005). After experiencing the joy of reading stories, his developmental motivation is gradually generated and being maintained through the story teaching practice and he also showed an interest in integrating with western cultures at the end of the study. Besides, no instrumental motivation in English learning was found in the process of the study.

Compared with other teaching methods and approaches, English story teaching has its unique role in motivating young learners' English learning. First, English stories include many vivid characters and are full of interesting plots which would arouse young learners' interests and they would pay more attention to the language. Besides, the repetitive vocabulary and structures would be presented to young learners again and again. It seems impossible for learners not to notice them. All these characteristics of English stories could give learners some motives in English learning just as in the cases of Linda and Frank. Once learners become fond of English stories, they would have desires to read more interesting stories or know more things in other cultures, which would make the maintaining of the motivation easier.

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